

THE REMOTE MAINTENANCE WORKER PROGRAM

SFY 07

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In FY 07, the State's Remote Maintenance Worker (RMW) grants program supported thirteen remote maintenance workers employed by seven non-profit entities through grants administered by the Operations Assistance Program of ADEC. Two State-employed RMWs provided similar services in two other separate regions of the State and a third State-employed RMW is teamed with the SEARHC RMW to provide service to Southeast Alaska bringing the total number of RMWs to sixteen.
- In FY 07, 187 communities received routine operation and maintenance (O&M) assistance and emergency response assistance from the RMW program.
- Initially, the RMW program was established to protect the State's investment in utility infrastructure in rural Alaska. If a problem arose, the RMW traveled to the community and fixed the problem. Today, RMWs still travel to communities in their service area to address utility O&M problems, but now they work alongside a local operator providing training as they troubleshoot the system together.
- In FY 07, the grants program was funded by a 25/75 State/federal matching grant. The State's share of the 1.63 million dollar grants program was \$407,500. The federal government (USEPA & USDA-RD), recognizing the importance of the program, provided over \$1.2 million in funding.
- The RMW grants program costs approximately \$10,421 per community per year.
- Today, the program remains crucial to rural communities and the State by protecting public health and the environment and safeguarding capital investments. The State continues to realize millions of dollars in system replacement cost savings each year. A study by the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) at the University of Alaska-Anchorage states that if the average lifetime of a sanitation facility can be extended even by only one year (from 15 to 16 years, for example), the benefits from reduced annual capital replacement costs would approximate \$4.2 million per year.
- The RMW circuit rider program has a long track record in preventing sanitation system failures and improving system performance in rural communities. The program has been acknowledged in several federal reports and by the Council on Rural Sanitation as necessary to provide continuing protection of State and federal government capital investments. As sanitation facility capital construction funding for rural Alaska increases, the program's importance increases.

- Four hundred thirty-eight (438) village trips were completed by the RMWs in FY 07. Routine trips reduce the need for emergency trips because problems are addressed before they result in catastrophic system failures.
- Due to the routine assistance that RMWs provided during FY 07, only 47 of the 438 trips were considered “emergencies” by the RMWs. However, when emergencies did arise, the RMWs responded; night or day, weekend or holiday. The direct and immediate response by the RMWs is estimated to have saved several million dollars in system replacement costs in FY 07.
- Due to the efforts of the RMWs, many rural operators have sought and obtained State certification. The number of RMW villages with certified operators has increased from 40 in FY 92 to 121 in FY 07. Rural operators are also now achieving certification at advanced levels and in disciplines other than just water treatment, such as wastewater treatment and collections and water distribution.
- Another encouraging statistic is the number of rural villages with more than one certified operator. Of the 121 villages with certified operators, 71 villages had more than one person certified to operate their utility system in FY 07.
- The need for entry-level water operator training continues to be high due to high operator turnover. However, the increasing demand for intermediate or advanced water operator training is an indicator that more villages are recognizing the benefits of retaining qualified and competent operators.
- Two hundred seventy-three (273) hours of Continuing Education Unit (CEU) training were delivered by the RMWs in FY 07. CEU training is a type of over-the-shoulder training that follows a more structured format than “conventional” over-the-shoulder training. The local operator receives training specific to their own plant while earning education credits that are necessary to renew their operator’s license or meet education requirements necessary for higher level certifications, without having to leave the community.
- Rural community managers, administrators, council members and clerks are also in need of training and technical assistance. The RMW programs around the State continued to provide support of the Utility Management training effort spearheaded by the Department of Community, Commerce & Economic Development (DCCED). Utility manager and clerk training courses were made possible through the joint efforts of the Rural Utility Business Advisor (RUBA) program and the RMW program.
- Due to the RMWs first-hand knowledge of local conditions and personnel, they are frequently called upon by various organizations and agencies to provide information and assistance on a wide variety of projects. Since travel to rural Alaska is expensive and sometimes unreliable, RMW input and insight can be invaluable for these other organizations doing business in rural Alaska.

